

**WASHINGTON** - U.S. Representatives Mark Kirk (R-IL) and Alcee L. Hastings (D-FL) introduced legislation yesterday that will help developing countries reduce foreign debt and provide comprehensive conservation programs to protect forests and endangered marine habitats throughout the world. The Forest and Coral Conservation Act of 2007 (H.R. 2185) reauthorizes and expands the Tropical Forest Conservation Act (TFCA) of 1998, which expires at the end of Fiscal Year 2007.

For seven years, the Tropical Forest Conservation Act has allowed qualified developing countries to apply each dollar spent on tropical forest or coral preservation toward foreign debt payments to the United States. Since the Act's enactment in 1998, twelve Tropical Forest Conservation Act agreements have been signed in Asia, the Caribbean, Central and South America, generating a total of \$135 million to help conserve fifty-million acres of tropical forests. This reauthorization expands the TFCA to protect all forests, coral reefs and associated coastal marine ecosystems.

"This legislation will make resources available for environmental stewardship that would otherwise not be met in many developing countries," said Congressman Mark Kirk. "By reauthorizing and expanding this important program, we will help developing nations reduce their debt through investment in long-term policies that will preserve key habitats, protecting endangered animals from extinction."

"Our proposed legislation builds on already successful and sound economic and conservation law. The benefits of this innovative initiative are plentiful. We strengthen the indigenous economies and civil society of developing countries, while simultaneously protecting the world's forests and endangered marine habitats for our children and generations to come," said Congressman Alcee Hastings.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 60 percent of the world's coral reefs may be destroyed by the year 2050 if the present rate of destruction continues. With few natural resources, nations in the Caribbean and Pacific with significant coral resources often resort to harvesting or otherwise exploiting coral reefs and other marine habitats to earn hard currency to service foreign debt.

The legislation is endorsed by a variety of international environmental organizations, including The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, the World Wildlife Fund and the Wildlife Conservation Society.